

Caucasian Albanian language

Caucasian Albanian (also called **Old Udi**, **Aluan** or **Aghwan**)^[3] is an extinct member of the Northeast Caucasian languages. It was spoken in Caucasian Albania, which stretched from current day south Dagestan to Azerbaijan. Linguists believe it is an early linguistic predecessor to the endangered North Caucasian Udi language.^[4] The distinct Caucasian Albanian alphabet used 52 letters.

Caucasian Albanian possibly corresponds to the "Gargarian" language identified by medieval Armenian historians. Despite its name, Caucasian Albanian bears no linguistic relationship whatsoever with the modern Indo-European Albanian, the language of Albania.

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Discovery and decipherment

The existence of the Caucasian Albanian literature was known only indirectly before the late 20th century. Koryun's *Life of Mashtots*, written in the 5th century but only surviving in much later corrupted manuscripts, and Movses Kaghankatvatsi's *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, written in the 10th century, attribute the conversion of the Caucasian Albanians to Christianity to two missionaries, Enoch and Dana, and the creation of the Caucasian Albanian alphabet to the Armenian scholar Mesrop Mashtots. A certain Bishop Jeremiah the translated the Christian Bible into their language. As recently as 1977, Bruce Metzger could write that "nothing of [this] version has survived".^[5]

In 1996, Zaza Aleksidze of the Centre of Manuscripts in Tbilisi, Georgia, discovered a palimpsest^[6] at Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, Egypt, with an unknown script.^[7] He went on to identify the alphabet as Caucasian Albanian,^[8] and to identify the manuscript as an early Christian lectionary from about the 5th or 6th century. The lectionary may be the earliest extant lectionary in the Christian religion.^[9]

Aghwan	
<div>Old Udi</div> <div>Gargarian</div> <div>Caucasian Albanian</div>	
Native to	Caucasian Albania
Era	6th–8th century AD. Developed into Udi ^[1]
Language family	<div>Northeast Caucasian</div> <div><ul style="list-style-type: none">Lezgic<ul style="list-style-type: none">Samur<ul style="list-style-type: none">Eastern Samur<ul style="list-style-type: none">Aghwan</div>
Writing system	Caucasian Albanian
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	xag
Linguist List	xag (http://multitree.org/codes/xag)
Glottolog	aghw1237 (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/aghw1237) ^[2]



A 7th-century column capital with Caucasian Albanian text

Then linguists Jost Gippert and Wolfgang Schulze got involved with the Caucasian Albanian alphabet.^[10] Specialized x-ray equipment was used, which made it possible to read the Caucasian Albanian palimpsest texts in their entirety.^[11] A list of Caucasian Albanian month names, which survived in a number of medieval manuscripts, gave one of the clues to the language.^[10] In 2017, two additional texts of Caucasian Albanian were discovered in Saint Catherine's Monastery.^[12] The original text on the palimpsests was erased anywhere between the 4th and 12th century.^[13]

Texts

The deciphered text of the lectionary includes excerpts from the Hebrew Bible (*Psalms* and *Isaiah*)^[3] and from the New Testament (*Acts of the Apostles* the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*, and the epistles of *Romans*, *1 Corinthians*, *2 Corinthians*, *Galatians*, *Ephesians*, *1 Thessalonians*, *2 Thessalonians*, *1 Timothy*, *2 Timothy*, *Hebrews*, *2 Peter*, *1 John* and *James*).^{[3][14][15]} Text from the *Gospel of John*, separate from the lectionary, was also found. Its text proved much more difficult to recover and on some pages it can only be identified by the Eusebian canons at the bottom of the page. This was likely a complete gospel originally,^[3] and it is possible that the whole Bible had even been translated into Caucasian Albanian.^[14]

The Caucasian Albanian translation of the Bible relies predominantly on Old Armenian translations, but it deviates from the known Armenian text in several places, suggesting that the original Greek and possibly Georgian and Syriac translations were also used as source texts.^[3]

Apart from the Caucasian Albanian palimpsests kept at Mt. Sinai, the most famous samples of Caucasian Albanian inscriptions were found in 1949 during excavations in Mingachevir region, Azerbaijan. Among the known Caucasian Albanian words are *zow* (I), *own* (and) and *avel-om* (much, ordinal form).^[16]

Phonology

Consonants

		Plosive		Fricative	Affricate		Approximant	Nasal	Trill
		Regular	Ejective		Regular	Ejective			
Bilabial		p b	pʼ					m	
Labiodental				f v					
Alveolar	Regular	t d	tʼ	s z	ts dz	tsʼ	l	n	r
	Palatalized	dʲ	tʲʼ		dzʲ		lʲ	nʲ	
Post-alveolar				ʃ ʒ	tʃ dʒ	tʃʼ			
Alveo-palatal				ɕ ʑ	tɕ dʑ	tɕʼ			
Palatal							j		
Velar		k g	kʼ	x ɣ					
Labialized velar							w		
Uvular		q	qʼ	χ					
Pharyngeal				ʕ					
Glottal				h					

References

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12. Scientists find languages not used since Dark Ages among ancient manuscripts recovered from monastery (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/lost-languages-found-ancient-manuscript-parchment-saint-catherine-monastery-sinai-peninsula-egypt-a7916346.html>).
13. Sarah Lasgow "Found: Hidden Examples of Long-Lost Languages in Centuries-Old Palimpsests" (<http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/saint-catherines-monastery-palimpsests-lost-language-undertext>)
14. For Acts, see Wolfgang Schulze, "Aspects of Udi–Iranian Language Contact", in Uwe Bläsing, Victoria Arakelova and Matthias Weinreich (eds.), *Studies on Iran and The Caucasus: In Honour of Garnik Asatryan on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 373–401, at 376.
15. See photo of Albanian script of 2 *Corinthians* 11:26–27 with its repetition of the phrase in "I was persecuted," (http://azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/ai113_folder/113_articles/113_zaza_secrets_revealed.html) which helped unlock the key to the alphabet for Aleksidze.
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